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## Planning for Bicycles in the Irish City: a Brief History (c. 3,000 words)

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When we think about a public policy issue in our world today, it is unsurprising to hear a historian point out that ‘we have been here before’. This is certainly a true statement about cycling and our cities and towns. Indeed, cycling was more popular – more every-day and more unremarkable – a century ago than it is today. As we now see a renaissance in cycling in Ireland, both for commuting and as a sport, it is worth looking back on its history. Some of today’s urban planning problems – how to balance the competing needs of motorised traffic, cyclists, and pedestrians; segregated traffic lanes; parking facilities; safety especially for the young; and air pollution – have a long history. Yet one of the problems that planners face is how to keep up to date with new research being published by social scientists, especially those working in universities. Sometimes articles appear on pay-for-access websites, generally not available to those outside of the academic world. Planners are also simply too busy to read lengthy, detailed histories, or to search for relevant new research being published in other countries. In this short article I will summarise recent research on cycling in urban Ireland and elsewhere in Europe. I will briefly comment on how cycling was discussed by Irish town planners in the past, and how it was discussed in Irish newspapers. In aiming to bridge a gap between the historical and the planning professions, I hope that some more knowledge of what happened in the past will allow planners to make more informed decisions about contemporary issues.

One of the problems that historians researching the history of cycling face is that it was so mundane and commonplace that it was simply taken for granted. The cyclist, as I will discuss more shortly, was all too often invisible to planners and remains so to historians. Cycling was so normal that researching it requires time and patience – those writing biographies or political histories have a much easier journey to take. However, in the last few years there has been a boom in interest in the history of cycling in Ireland and other European countries, spurred on not least by our pressing need to find environmentally sustainable transport solutions and by the dramatic growth of cycling infrastructure. In Ireland we see this most of all in Dublin although other cities have ambitious plans for the near future. At the same time, former railways have been converted to high-quality cycle routes – perhaps for keeping fit more than for commuting to work – and these link urban centres such as Waterford, Dungarvan, Athlone, and Mullingar. Many more are under construction at the time of writing.

The most important historical research on cycling in Irish cities is by the Irish historian Dr. Erika Hanna, who teaches at the University of Bristol. Her research is titled 'Seeing like a Cyclist: Visibility and Mobility in Modern Dublin, c. 1930-1980', and was published in the journal *Urban History* in 2015 (Hanna, 2015). Hanna charts how cycling in Dublin was downgraded from a normal everyday mode of commuting to an unfashionable fringe activity. The shift happened around the mid-1960s, spurred on by the increased car ownership of Dublin's middle classes, and the overarching priority of making it quicker and easier for them to get from their suburban homes to their work and to the city centre. One problem that Hanna notes is the lack of statistics for cycling in Ireland before the 1960s; however, it is evident that in the early years of the Free State, bicycles were ubiquitous on Irish streets. We learn of a government traffic report from 1927 that states there were approximately 500,000 bicycles in the country, roughly one for every six persons (though we must remember that cycles were often shared). During the 'Emergency' years, fuel restrictions made cycling even more popular, especially as a way for Dubliners to get to work. Hanna notes that, as a result, the Lord Mayor, Martin O'Sullivan, boasted in 1944 that Dublin was 'the most cycle-minded city in Europe' and the *Irish Independent* commented that a 'heavy incidence of bicycle traffic' was a 'special feature of Dublin traffic' (Hanna, 2015). Such comments would not be out of place today.

As today, the sharing of public roads by cyclists and motorists was a point of contention. As early as 1930, Hanna discovers complaints about cyclists in the pages of the *Irish Times*: 'What is [the bicycle] in these days save a nuisance to legitimate traffic? The cyclist smiles. He knows perfectly well that he is a nuisance' (*Irish Times*, 20 Dec. 1930). Prejudices against cyclists also extended to questions of class: while wealthy Dubliners, including women, were often to be seen on their bicycles in the Edwardian era, the rise of motorised cars drove a new wedge between richer and poorer city residents. Hanna argues that by the 1950s, with a very rapid increase in cars on Dublin's roads, the bicycle was made an unrespectable mode of transport. The number of cars in Dublin, she shows, rose from 23,364 in 1938 to 85,297 in 1960 and 158,423 in 1970. In comments that would be unimaginable today, the Minister for Local Government, Patrick O'Donnell, referred to the bicycle as 'the vehicle of the poor man' in an Oireachtas debate in 1955. Some years later, the Galway TD Fintan Coogan was even more direct in his categorisation of the urban cyclist: they possessed 'the small man's motor car', he thought, and were evidence of the 'difference between having a job and not having one' (Hanna, 2015).

Undoubtedly these kinds of disapproving comments, which were likely shared by many middle-class Dubliners at the time, contributed in some way towards making cycling a more marginal activity. Comparing the first statistics for cycling in Dublin (from 1961) with those of a decade later, Hanna shows how the cyclist almost vanished from the city's streets. Cycling fell from 27% of all traffic in 1961 to just 4% in 1971; the number of bicycles crossing the canals each day fell by 80%. She also demonstrates how cycling fell off the radar for Dublin's town planners: traffic plans through the 1950s to the early 1970s, such as the Schaechterle, Wright, or Travers Morgan reports, 'did not see any cyclists in the city'. Cyclists had no urban lobby group and were largely left to fend for themselves on increasingly busy and dangerous streets. In contrast, pedestrian safety was a regular concern in these

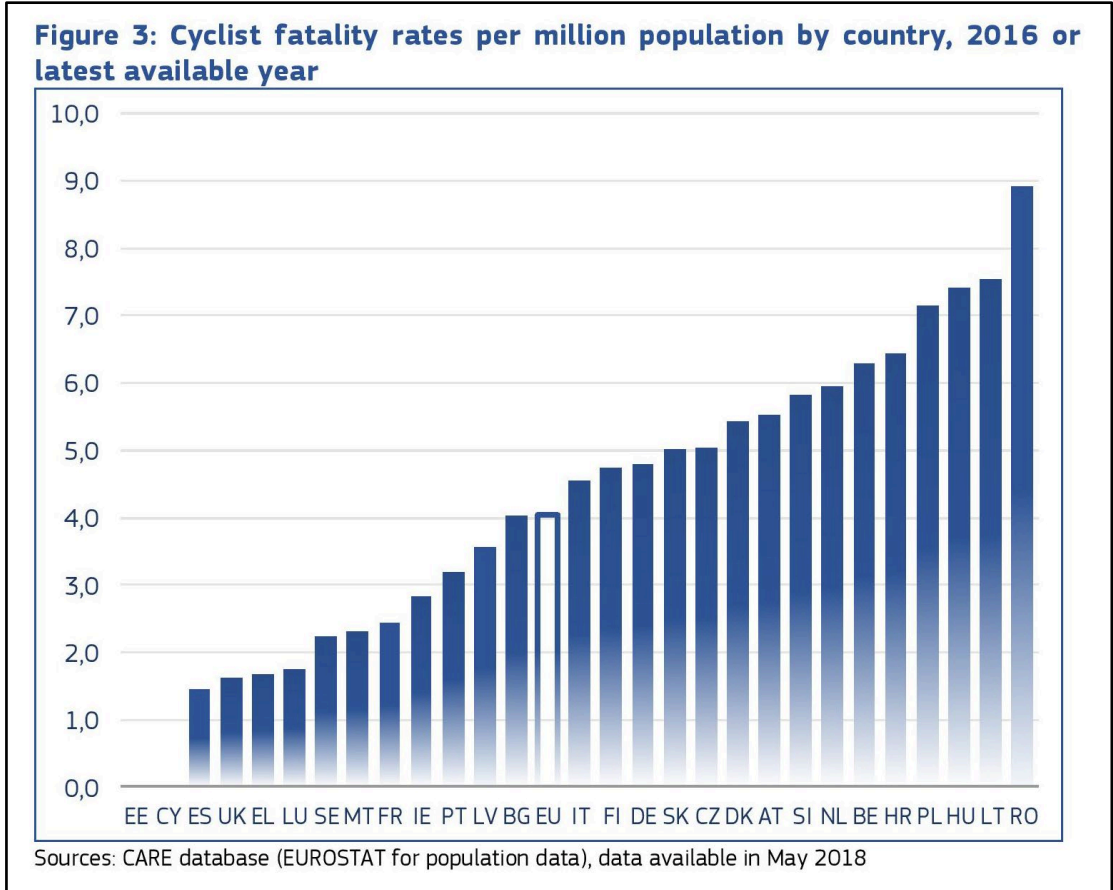
reports. For cyclists, the human cost was tragic: Hanna notes that 67 cyclists were killed on Irish roads in 1959 and 68 in 1967. Many of these accidents were in smaller towns and in rural areas, but the contrast with contemporary statistics is stark: there were 15 cyclists killed in Ireland in 2017, and 9 in 2018 (*Irish Times*, 12 May 2018). These figures are broadly in line with the averages over the past ten years – but are now lower than many other European countries (European Commission, 2018) (Figs. 1, 2). Of course, one death on our roads is too many, but Hanna’s research shows that in the 1950s and 1960s a cyclist was killed on Irish roads more than *once a week*.

**Table 1: Number of cyclist fatalities by country, 2007-2016**

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
BE	90	86	89	70	70	69	73	76	83	71
BG	-	35	29	27	17	32	31	29	29	-
CZ	116	93	84	80	63	78	74	68	84	53
DK	54	54	25	26	30	22	33	30	26	31
DE	425	456	462	381	399	406	354	396	383	393
EE	13	9	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	-
IE	15	13	7	5	9	8	5	13	-	-
EL	16	22	15	23	13	21	15	19	11	18
ES	90	59	57	67	48	74	70	75	58	67
FR	142	148	162	147	141	164	147	159	149	162
HR	28	47	29	28	28	21	23	19	34	27
IT	352	288	295	265	282	292	251	273	251	275
CY	3	6	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	0
LV	18	15	26	13	15	18	13	16	9	7
LT	-	-	-	-	-	-	18	19	22	-
LU	0	0	2	1	2	0	0	0	0	1
HU	158	109	103	92	85	84	68	98	83	73
MT	0	0	0	0	-	-	-	-	0	1
NL	147	145	138	119	144	145	112	118	107	101
AT	37	62	39	32	42	52	52	45	39	48
PL	498	433	371	280	314	300	306	286	300	271
PT	34	42	29	33	45	32	29	35	25	33
RO	179	179	157	182	140	154	161	151	162	176
SI	17	17	18	17	16	12	16	13	14	12
SK	61	46	22	27	-	-	-	-	-	-
FI	22	18	20	26	19	19	20	27	30	26
SE	33	30	20	21	21	28	14	33	17	22
UK	138	117	104	111	109	120	113	116	100	105
EU	2.660	2.483	2.289	2.048	2.054	2.152	1.982	2.096	2.008	2.015
Yearly Change		-6,6%	-7,8%	-10,5%	0,3%	4,7%	-7,9%	5,7%	-4,2%	0,3%
IS	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
NO	7	10	9	5	12	12	10	12	5	12
CH	30	27	54	34	39	36	21	34	39	33

Source: CARE database, data available in May 2018  
 Totals for EU include latest available data (Lithuanian and Slovakian data not included in totals)

**Fig. 1. Number of cyclist fatalities by country in the EU and neighbouring countries, 2007-2016 (European Commission, 2018: 3). The missing Irish figures are 2015 (9) and 2016 (10).**



**Fig. 2. Cyclist fatality rates per million population by country in the EU and neighbouring countries, 2016 or latest available year (2014 for Ireland). Ireland’s rate is substantially lower than the European average, with Spain and the UK at one extreme and Lithuania and Romania at the other (European Commission, 2018: 5).**

Hanna shows that cycling never fully vanished from our cities and towns. Instead, it was not prioritised nor catered for by city officials and planners. Opportunities for creating safe cycling routes were largely missed, and the car – by today’s standards – was given too much emphasis in urban planning schemes. Former railway lines in Dublin such as the Harcourt Street route were not redeveloped as cycling routes (the story was similar in other cities, not least in Cork). Multi-lane roads generally omitted any kind of cycling lane. With the Oil Crisis of the early 1970s and the beginnings of concerns for air pollution and the environment, this tide slowly began to turn. Hanna points to the ‘Bring back the Bike’ campaign in Dublin from 1977 and the activism of the Dublin city councillor Carmencita Henderman and the architect Uinseann MacEoin. She notes that Dublin’s first short cycleways opened two years later in 1979.

There are many avenues within the history of Irish cycling that remain to be explored. For those interested in earlier time periods, Dr. Brian Griffin, a lecturer at Bath Spa University, has published a book titled *Cycling in Victorian Ireland* (Griffin, 2006) and also a recent article, ‘Cycle Camping in Victorian and Edwardian Ireland’, in the journal *Irish Studies Review* (Griffin, 2019). Griffin delves in the social and cultural revolution of cycling in the long nineteenth century. He includes many

illustrations from the time. Dr. Joseph Brady, a geographer at University College Dublin, discusses cycling briefly in two of his books on modern Dublin: *Dublin, 1930-1950: the Emergence of the Modern City* (Brady, 2014) and *Dublin in the 1950s and 1960s: Cars, Shops and Suburbs* (Brady, 2017). In contrast to Hanna, his perspective is not overly friendly to cyclists: the ‘cycling fraternity’ (as they are termed) are referred to as an ‘intractable problem’; their ‘bad behaviour’, he argues, was ‘nothing new’ (Brady, 2014: 186, 190, 192). This, of course, is how cyclists were described in the newspapers of the time but sits rather uneasily with the hostility (and sometimes aggression) that cyclists – as particularly vulnerable road users – continue to face today. Finally, in terms of new writings on Irish (and international) cycling, Dr. James Fraser, at Maynooth University, has recently penned an article for *RTÉ Brainstorm* on ‘On Your Bike: How the Bicycle influenced Literature and Art’ (Fraser, 2019). He also runs a new research network and the Twitter handle @bicyculture.

Spurred on by Hanna’s pioneering research, I studied the early town planning schemes for other Irish cities and towns and searched newspapers for references to the increasingly marginal figure of the urban cyclist. My results paint a similar picture to what Hanna describes for Dublin. Manning Robertson’s town plan for Dún Laoghaire (Robertson, 1936) says nothing about cycling, and neither does his scheme for Cork (Robertson, 1941). Patrick Abercrombie’s co-authored plan for Dublin (Abercrombie et al., 1941) is similarly silent on cycling, and so too Dermot O’Toole’s town planning report for Galway (O’Toole, 1945). Even in the hey-day of Irish cycling, the subject was clearly deemed not sufficiently important to be noted in proposed towns plans (how differently planners see things today). The only two exceptions appear to be Frank Gibney’s 1943 study for Waterford (Gibney, 1943), which suggested guidelines for road building including ‘cycle tracks’ and even mentioned facilities for bicycle parking. Sadly, Gibney’s visionary scheme for Waterford – as chronicled and illustrated by the planner Fergal MacCabe in his excellent new book *Ambition and Achievement: the Civic Visions of Frank Gibney* (MacCabe, 2018) – remained unexecuted. The other is Noel Moffet’s 1944 pamphlet ‘Planning for Leisure’, published as part of the National Planning Exhibition held at the Mansion House, Dublin, in the spring of 1944. Moffet proposed that the Ireland that would emerge after the war years should have routes for cyclists to explore the countryside and visit youth hostels; he called for new ‘motor roads’ (motorways) to be built exclusively for cars, with old roads given over to ‘hikers and cyclists’ (Moffet, 1944). This vision, from more than 70 years ago, remains largely to be achieved.

As previously mentioned, old newspapers also tell us about how cycling was more common in times past than it is today in Irish cities and towns. A short piece in the *Irish Independent* from January 1946 noted an increase in cyclists on Irish roads owing to a larger second-hand market and the end of war-time restrictions on imports from England (11 Jan. 1946) (**Fig. 3**). A general strike on Paris’s public transport networks three years later was reported to readers of Dublin’s *Evening Herald* as ‘Parisians take to the bicycle’ (25 Nov. 1949). In scenes likely familiar to Dubliners from the war years, the French reporter thought that ‘the days of the German occupation were recalled by thousands of bicycles on the streets of Paris’ in a great ‘determined effort to get to work’. In May 1951, the *Connacht Sentinel* ran a piece on cycling in Galway (29 May 1951). It began by commenting that ‘when the emergency ended the number of motors on the roads took a huge upward jump. ...

Since Galway was allotted new registration letters last Autumn over 600 new cars have been registered in the county.' As in Dublin, this was not accompanied by a fall in cycling: 'the demand on bicycles', the journalist wrote, 'now is as great as ever it was'. The problem was where to park so many bicycles:

'Every Saturday bicycles line the kerbs between Eyre Square and Mainguard Street and are packed so closely together that it is often difficult to find a place where one might step off or on to the footpath. ... The pedestrian's trouble is increased by the fact that the footpath space is further encroached upon by the parking of bicycles against the shop fronts. ... Cyclists cannot leave their machines in safety on a side street and walk away, and there appears to be only one bicycle park convenient to the shopping centre.'

However, and perhaps surprisingly, the liberal-minded journalist was sympathetic to cyclists needs and asked city officials to make space for them in the centre of Galway in a way that would have been very unlikely in the 1960s or 1970s:

'The convenience of shoppers who use bicycles must be considered just as much as the convenience of shoppers who use their motors and if there is to be provision for bicycle parks it must be convenient to the main shopping centre. ... It is good to enter Galway and see its crowded streets, to see the signs of brisk business in the shops. It would be most undesirable to have restrictions placed on the cyclists who form a big part of those who throng the footpaths, but it is desirable to convenience them by providing them with places where they might leave their machines in safety while visiting the shops.'

The newspapers of the time also carried accounts of the social gatherings of organisations such as the Irish Cycle Traders' Association, which would substantially decline in influence through the 1960s as the tide turned against cycling. At their annual dinner in Dublin's Central Hotel in February 1955, their guest of honour was the former Lord Mayor and Fianna Fáil politician, Senator Andrew Clarkin. In his speech he stated that the bicycle was 'not on its way out', and other speakers made similar comments, including that 'the bicycle was a very essential part of the nation's transport' – the kind of comment that was quite rare ten years later (*Irish Independent*, 10 Feb. 1955).

## BICYCLES MORE PLENTIFUL

Bicycles are more plentiful as a result of the increased imports from England in recent months. This, together with the return of cars, has led to a lowering of prices for secondhand cycles.

Many people who bought bicycles because of the reduced transport facilities are selling them, and machines fitted with three-speed gears and dynamo lighting can now be bought for as low as £8.

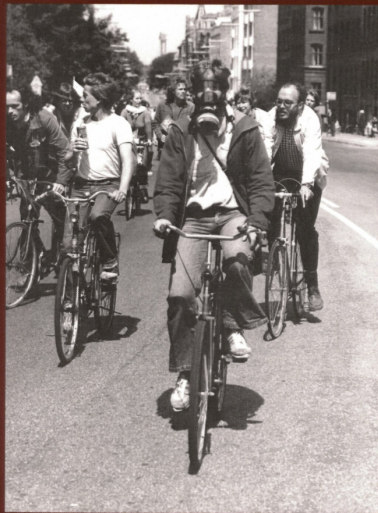
For the nine months ended September last bicycles to a value of £31,004 were imported, as against £2,025 worth for the same period the previous year. In October £7,867 worth came into the country, and they are coming in at approximately this rate each month since.

Fig. 3. 'Bicycles More Plentiful', *Irish Independent*, 11 Jan. 1946.

The new interest in the history of cycling is shared by researchers across Europe and beyond. Hanna's work on cycling in Dublin builds on a wave of new research over the past ten years on well-known cycling cities such as Stockholm, Copenhagen, Freiburg, and Amsterdam (Timms and Watling, 2015). The latest issue of the journal *Urban History* (August 2019) includes an analysis of cycling and town planning in Copenhagen since 1880 – 'Making a Bicycle City' – by Martin Emanuel, a researcher based in Sweden (Emanuel 2019). Emanuel shows how the residents of Copenhagen campaigned for dedicated cycling infrastructure more than a century ago, and even as it became a less popular mode of urban travel in the 1960s (similar to Dublin but to a lesser extent overall), the survival of segregated routes through these difficult 'car-centric' years meant that there was a foundation for renewal and expansion in the 1990s. Planners in Dublin and other Irish cities and towns had no comparable infrastructure to call upon as they set about building modern cycling routes. He also notes how urban cyclists came together to protest about air pollution and safety, including by wearing gas masks to raise awareness (Fig. 4). Emanuel shows that today almost one-third of all journeys in Copenhagen are by bicycle, making the Danish capital one of the most environmentally sustainable major cities in Europe (Emanuel 2019).

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**Fig. 4.** The front cover of the August 2019 issue of the journal *Urban History*, featuring an arresting photograph from Martin Emanuel's research showing cycling activists in Copenhagen, c. 1980, raising awareness of issues such as air pollution and safety on the city's roads.

Irish planners look all around the world for examples of innovative urban designs and propose solutions based on international best-practice. As well as looking to neighbouring countries we can also look back into the history of cycling in our own cities and towns and elsewhere. Many of today's problems have long antecedents and we can learn from the past in creating the future. Cycling is a remarkable example of this, not least because unlike most other forms of modern transport, it was a more common sight a century ago than it is even today as it continues to undergo a great renaissance.

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## Biographical note and photograph

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